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PROGRAMME QUESTIONS: EVALUATION

New directions for evaluation in the professional literature

Conference room paper

1. The present conference room paper concerns new developments in evaluation and is based on a survey of literature on current evaluation practices and related subjects. The reviewed literature includes mainly those works written by evaluation practitioners at the national and international levels. Most authors are from North America, although some are from other regions of the world. The implications of these new developments for the future evaluation in the United Nations are also discussed.

I. SHIFT FROM GOAL-BASED EVALUATIONS TO MANAGEMENT-ORIENTED EVALUATIONS

A. Goal-based evaluations

2. The traditional approach to evaluation was to emphasize goals and objectives. In this approach, evaluation attempts to determine the extent to which the stated goals and objectives of a programme are being achieved (effectiveness evaluation), and is concerned with causal relationships between organization actions and outcomes (outcome or impact evaluations). It also focuses on summative evaluation which is done "for the purpose of making the judgements about the basic worth of a programme" 1/ to aid decision makers as to whether to continue or discontinue a programme. These types of evaluations have normally been conducted by those who are external to the programmes or organizations evaluated, and so are normally called external evaluations.

3. The problem with the goal-based approach is that in many real-life situations, "organization goals are not clear - they are frequently vague and ambiguous, established more for symbolic political reasons than as clear-cut guides to action". 2/ Consequently, measuring the degree of attainment of such goals (and objectives) is either impossible or unrelated to actual performance of the organization or programme. In addition, programme managers are not in general interested in establishing causal relationships but in improving their programmes. Because goal-based summative evaluation "narrows the information-gathering function to a few questions about goal attainment or effects, it is of only limited help as a feedback mechanism with respect to the variety of programme conditions and constituent (user) perspectives that affect programme performance". 3/ Outcome or impact evaluations also require considerable time to complete. Thus, the typical criticism of evaluation has been that: decision makers' needs were not met; evaluation products were not timely; and the information produced was only marginally useful. 4/ As a result, the utilization of such evaluations was poor.

B. Management-oriented evaluations

4. In response to criticisms about goal-based external evaluations, different approaches have been advocated by evaluators, particularly those interested in increasing the utilization of evaluation findings. It has been pointed out that "the evaluator's role is shifting away from a narrow analytic, objective report of facts towards an expanded role that incorporates the traditional focus with a more service-oriented, supportive problem-solving approach to evaluation". 5/ Evaluation is thus becoming more management-oriented. The term "management-oriented evaluation" is defined here as evaluation focusing on the practical concerns of managers and other decision makers. These concerns include both managerial and policy issues. Since evaluators are expected to play the role of facilitators, rather than that of critics, closer working relationhips with managers and other decision makers are required. The following are several examples of relatively new evaluation functions and approaches practised by public organizations.

1. Goal clarification and the establishment of performance indicators

5. Problems regarding goals and objectives are mentioned in paragraph 3 above. However, the concept of goals is inherent in the definition of an organization; organizations exist to achieve goals. What is needed is therefore to operationalize goals and objectives. By helping identify concrete goals and feasible ways to measure goal attainment, evaluation can help policy makers and managers decide realistically what their programmes can do and should do. It is also increasingly helping managers in finding ways to "translate policy goals into ambitious, yet realistic, input, process and outcome objectives, and performance indicators". Performance indicators provide a basis not only for assessing programme performance but also for implementing programmes. 6/ Because of the capability of evaluation research to clarify goals, evaluation is increasingly used in the strategic planning

process to identify organizational missions, values, objectives and strategies. 7/ In order to perform these functions, evaluators have to participate more actively in policy formulation, and programme planning and development. 8/ With respect to performance indicators, it should be noted that organizations that have successfully established such indicators are those involved in operational activities or in health, education and social services. The literature survey conducted for the present paper did not find any examples of performance indicators for substantive activities. However, some government agencies are planning to establish performance indicators for such areas as research. 9/

6. Past in-depth evaluations did not in general clarify objectives for managers, but merely pointed out that there was a need to define objectives clearly. Future in-depth evaluations could, if necessary, identify specific goals for programmes and strategies to attain them. In addition, more active involvement of evaluation officers in the formulation of the medium-term plan may be necessary, both at Headquarters and other duty stations.

2. Creating incentive systems and communicating the value of programmes

7. Another new role for evaluation is to help managers in creating suitable incentive systems to stimulate improvements in the performance of organizations and programmes for which they are responsible. Incentive systems might include, inter alia, removing constraints, delegating authority and increasing control over resources. Public recognition for a job well done by giving awards to units for outstanding performance and by recognizing high performance in newsletters can also be important motivators. 10/ Motivation is considered a key factor in improving performance. It is pointed out that only in organizations with the culture of "earning" (where people know their work will be judged, and that rewards will be based on accomplishment, and therefore have high motivation for excellence) can enhanced organization performance be achieved. Neither the organizational culture of "entitlement" nor of "fear" can help improve performance. 11/

8. Communicating the value of an organization and its programmes is considered "an integral part of a four-step process that evaluators can use to help an organization or programme become more results oriented". The other three steps in the process are: (a) identifying performance objectives, (b) assessing performance and (c) helping improve performance. These three steps depend fundamentally on communication. 12/ Evaluators can help managers to select appropriate forms of communication and the right measurement systems to be used for external reporting. Increased attention is also being paid to improving the readability and design of reports prepared by evaluators themselves. 13/

9. United Nations evaluation units can also help create incentives for excellence by publicizing success stories in their reports and newsletters.

3. Wider use of evaluation research and flexible use of evaluation approaches

10. Unlike the traditional evaluation approach which had a narrow focus, new approaches advocate the use of different types of evaluation to serve different purposes. It is considered that the following different purposes, all of which are aspects of good management, can be served by evaluation: (a) needs assessment, (b) basic research, (c) small-scale testing, (d) field evaluation, (e) policy analyses, (f) fiscal accountability, (g) coverage accountability, (h) impact assessment and (i) economic analyses. 14/ Among these different purposes, needs assessment is becoming increasingly important. This is because recently many private and public organizations have become concerned with quality issues. Quality is redefined in terms of user needs. Quality of products and services is, therefore, judged by how well they fulfil needs and expectations of users or clients. 15/ In this context, needs assessment is required if managers are to tailor their products and services to user needs. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) allocates Special Programme Resources (SPR) funds for this purpose. For example, needs assessments for non-round-table countries is estimated to require $2.1 million during the fifth cycle (1992-1996). 16/ On the other hand, the United Nations does not in general allocate funds explicitly for this purpose. It does not appear that comprehensive and systematic needs assessments have been made for most subprogrammes. There is a need to strengthen the capacity of substantive units to make such assessments.

11. The following six major categories of evaluation are identified by an association of professional evaluators: (a) front-end analysis (pre-installation, context, feasibility analysis), (b) evaluability assessment, (c) formative evaluation (developmental, process), (d) impact evaluation (summative, outcome, effectiveness), (e) programme monitoring, and (f) evaluation of evaluation. 17/ These evaluations are used to serve needs and priorities of users of evaluations, i.e., decision makers at different levels and in different areas.

12. The shift from goal-based external evaluations to management-oriented evaluations, it was noted in the professional literature, increased the reliance on internal evaluation (evaluations done by staff members responsible for evaluation or, in the case of self-evaluation, by programme staff). The following roles of internal evaluators have been suggested: (a) management consultant, (b) decision-support specialist, (c) management information specialist, (d) systems generalist, (e) expert troubleshooter, (f) advocate and (g) systematic planner. 18/ These roles suggest that internal evaluation is similar to organizational assessment, organizational diagnosis and organizational development. 19/

13. The above description of different types of evaluations and functions and roles for internal evaluators gives a wide interpretation of evaluation. In the case of the United Nations, some of these functions are shared by different units. In this connection, it should be noted that the roles of auditors are also expanding. For example, performance auditing includes elements which were traditionally considered as functions of evaluation. If

the objective is to improve organizational performance and enhance effectiveness, it is difficult for any of these disciplines to limit themselves to the narrow traditional focus. Coordination is required not only for avoiding duplication but also to bring together different disciplines and approaches, since organizational effectiveness has many dimensions, and to prevent omissions in coverage.

II. NEED FOR BALANCE BETWEEN EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL EVALUATIONS

14. As indicated above, internally based management-oriented evaluation can provide programme managers with much needed information to improve programme performance. However, shift from traditional external evaluation to internal management-oriented evaluation would leave legislative bodies without much of the information they require 20/ on how resources are being spent and managed, and on what results have been achieved. 21/ In addition to accountability, the issue of legitimacy is central to the measurement of public organizations' performance. 22/ The evaluation of legitimacy seeks answers to the question of whether it is appropriate for an organization to be carrying out certain activities. 23/ Addressing this question requires traditionally externally based evaluation.

15. The above account indicates that there is a need for both internal and external evaluations. The Central Evaluation Unit is an internal evaluation office of the United Nations, but is external to the programmes being evaluated. It is recommended therefore that the traditional evaluation approach should be retained by the Unit and used when conducting in-depth evaluations for CPC and that it encourage the development of management-oriented evaluation in the United Nations.

Notes

1/ Michael Quinn Patton, Practical evaluation (Beverly Hills, California, Sage Publications, 1982), p. 48.

2/ Florence Heffron, Organization theory and public organizations: The political connection (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 326.

3/ Charles McClintock, "Toward a theory of formative program evaluation", in David S. Cordray and Mark W. Lipsey, ed. Evaluation studies review annual, vol. 11 (Newbury Park, California, Sage Publications, 1987), p. 212.

4/ Joseph S. Wholey, Mark A. Abramson and Christopher Bellavita, Performance and credibility: Developing excellence in public and nonprofit organizations (Lexington, Massachusetts and Toronto, D. C. Heath and Company, 1986), p. 15.

Notes (continued)

5/ Ibid., p. 288.

6/ Ibid, p. 4.

7/ See, for example, John P. King, "The role of evaluation in strategic planning: setting performance expectations at a state mental health authority and a state institution of higher education", in Performance and credibility, op. cit., pp. 83-92, and R. Dale Safrit, "Organizational values clarification as a component of strategic planning: New horizons for qualitative and quantitative evaluation" (paper delivered at 1991 Annual Meeting of the American Evaluation Association, Chicago, Illinois).

8/ Richard C. Sonnichsen, "Advocacy evaluation: A model for internal evaluation offices", in Evaluation and Program Planning, vol. 11 (1988), p. 141.

9/ For example, the United States Agency for International Development does not exclude research activities from its Agency-wide Programme Performance Information System for Strategic Management. The inclusion of research activities in the system however is recommended to be deferred owing to methodological questions in measuring performance in this area. "Program Performance Information for Strategic Management: A preliminary strategic plan for PRISM", mimeograph dated 16 September 1991, p. 6.

10/ Wholey, Abramson and Bellavita, op. cit., p. 9.

11/ For more detailed information, see Judith M. Bardwick, Danger in the comfort zone (New York, American Management Association, 1991).

12/ Christopher Bellavita, "Communicating effectively about performance is a purposive activity", in Performance and credibility, op. cit., p. 243.

13/ Charles A. Bowsher, "Meeting the new American management challenge in a Federal Agency: Lessons from the General Accounting Office", in Public Administration Review (vol. 52, Number 1, January/February 1992), p. 7.

14/ These uses were delineated in 1980 by a committee of the United States National Academy of Science, cited in Michael Quinn Patton, Practical evaluation (Beverly Hills, California, Sage Publications, 1982), p. 44.

15/ David A. Garvin, Managing quality: the strategic and competitive edge (New York, The Free Press and London, Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1988), p. 24.

16/ "Report of the Administrator of UNDP on the preparations for the fifth programming cycle - Special programme resources: programming documents" (DP/1992/7), category D, para. 47.

17/ The categories were identified by the Evaluation Research Society Standards Committee in 1980, cited in Practical evaluation, op. cit., p. 44.

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Notes (continued)

18/ Arnold J. Love, Internal evaluation: Building organizations from within, Applied Social Research Methods Series, vol. 24 (Newbury Park, California, Sage Publications, 1991), pp. 10-11.

19/ Ibid., p. 4.

20/ Eleanor Chelimsky, David Cordray and Lois-ellin Datta, "Federal evaluation: The pendulum has swung too far", Evaluation Practice, vol. 10, No. 2, May 1989, p. 26.

21/ Ibid., p. 25.

22/ Joseph L. Bower, The two faces of management (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), p. 44.

23/ Alain J. Barbarie, "Evaluating Government research and development: beyond 'quality of research'" in Performance and credibility, op. cit., p. 110.